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Opinion nuggets: Fooling ourselves

Posted: November 27, 2010 - 12:00am

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It has become conventional wisdom that American students think they are a lot smarter than they really are.

Their self-esteem is far ahead of their performance.

Where in the world would they get such ideas? Maybe from their own states.

A study by a Washington research group documents that state standards are much more forgiving than international ones.

How forgiving are they? Double the achievement gap between black and white students.

An extreme example can be found in Tennessee, where an astounding 90 percent of fourth-graders are proficient in math, according to the state test. Yet, only 29 percent are proficient in international standards - a whopping 61 percent achievement gap.

A similar canyon-size gap was found in Mississippi.

In Florida, the gap is much less: 69 percent are proficient on state standards and 41 percent are proficient on international standards.

In Georgia, it's 78 percent proficiency in state standards and 32 percent in international standards.

Only Massachusetts recorded higher proficiency in state standards (63 percent) than international ones (49 percent).

This means that as a nation, we have to stop kidding ourselves and move to national and international metrics.

The rest of the world is passing us by while we dumb down our tests.

Power of journalism

News magazines, like much of print journalism, are struggling these days.

Yet, there still is great power.

Time magazine illustrated it by purchasing a house in Detroit and spending a year documenting the stories of this city. Once a magnet of opportunity for Americans looking for jobs, it is so desolate that part of the city is turning rural.

Time editor John Huey wrote, "It was a tremendous experience - fascinating, energizing, challenging,

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Axing Craig from airport name is a tone-deaf move

It's pretty obvious that the Jacksonville Aviation Authority wasn't thinking clearly when it decided to rename Craig Airport as part of a marketing campaign.



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enduring and indeed fun."

Jacksonville, like most American cities, has a bit of the Detroit challenges. The Times-Union spends meaningful effort in similar projects, as in its City of Hope series or the stories on the Grand Park neighborhood, digging deeply into urban challenges.

Spend time in a neighborhood and you discover the inspiring and depressing stories of people. That's journalism.

It's not easy, especially in an era of tight budgets.

But it matters still.

Rare moderation

In an era of shouting, extremism and partisanship, any oasis of moderation is welcome.

Thus, it is good news to see a website titled ProCon.org that actually lives up its name.

We discovered the site when reviewing the various sides on the debate over locating an Islamic cultural center about two blocks from Ground Zero.

In the process we learned:

- The cultural center is not a mosque in the common definition of being a house of worship. Actually, it's more like a YMCA with a prayer room as part of it.
- There was a Muslim prayer room on the 17th floor of the South Tower World Trade Center. By some flexible definitions, the trade center was a mosque.
- Most Americans, ranging from 54 percent to 71 percent, have said in polls they oppose locating the building so close to the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, attack.
- The original name of the development, Cordoba House, is viewed differently. Supporters see it as representing a Middle Ages city where Muslims, Christians and Jews lived in peace. Opponents see it as a victory monument for terrorists.

In any case, the ProCon.org website offers welcome context for those interested in both sides of a story.

Postal parachute

First, the good news (but only if your name is John E. Potter): When he retires next month, Postmaster General Potter will walk away with a separation package worth as much as \$5.5 million, according to The Washington Post.

That includes his retirement package, deferred compensation and leave time. He will also get full health care benefits for the first year of his retirement.

Now, the bad news: The Postal Service is in deep debt.

To survive economically, it insists, it must eliminate Saturday deliveries and raise the price of a first-class stamp from 44 cents to 46 cents (up from 15 cents about 30 years ago).

Could it be that the good news is part of the reason for the bad news?

The Postal Service offers outdated technology, and its generosity toward top management is contributing to its demise.

More obesity concerns

By now, most Americans know that obesity is as serious a health issue as smoking and will require a similar aggressive effort.

Most of the attention has focused on health, but national security is a serious issue, as well.

Obesity is the leading reason that young Americans can't qualify for the armed forces. Since 1995, the proportion of recruits who failed their physical exams due to weight increased by a startling 70 percent.

"At least 9 million young adults, 27 percent of all young Americans ages 17 to 24, are too overweight to enlist," wrote the group Mission: Readiness, Military Leaders for Kids, in a letter to Congress.

The leaders are supporting legislation in Congress to fully fund better child nutrition. Many children eat a majority of their meals at school.

Thus, yet another demand on our schools. And this is important, not only for the health of the students

but for the security of our nation.

Lessons on charter schools

Alternatives to public education sometimes get a halo effect, simply because they are new.

According to Time magazine, just 17 percent of charter schools significantly outperform their public school counterparts.

Nevertheless, 65 percent of charter schools have waiting lists in 2009.

The key is high standards, accountability and persistence for the sake of the children.

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Comments (6)

Correlation

By **Max42** | 11/27/10 - 08:36 am

From today's editorial:

"This means that as a nation, we have to stop kidding ourselves and move to national and international metrics. The rest of the world is passing us by while we dumb down our tests."

From yesterday's editorial:

"Education gaps must be closed between whites, blacks and Latinos."

The education gap is being "closed". We are dumbing down our standards in an attempt to close the gap.

One can not change the wind, but one can adjust the sails.

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Standards?

By **educ8er** | 11/27/10 - 08:52 am

Are we endorsing metric systems? Is that the key item in this story? We have been phasing the system in for years. It is not inexpensive and at a time when dollars in education are premium it is not a wise observation/recommendation. It is not the education system lagging, it is the industry that does not change their systems. Until industry changes, why should students learn the system? Did you compare European standards to knowing the American standards, or is that unfair?

What are you doing today to improve yesterday?

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With all due respect...

By **Max42** | 11/27/10 - 09:08 am

....educ8er, the meaning of the word "metrics" in this context does not refer the specific metric system of weights and measures, but is rather using the word as a reference to any of a number of systems of measurement for academic achievement.

One can not change the wind, but one can adjust the sails.

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Do away with the FACT

By **Bull Gator** | 11/27/10 - 08:19 pm



The most detrimental thing happening to our students today is the FCAT and all standardized testing. Teach the subject to the best of your ability. Don't dumb down the class to the lowest achieving student. Today our schools spend a great deal of the year teaching to a test rather than teach a subject.



We have fallen behind other nations because we don't teach basic math, english, (as a matter of fact we don't teach english at all) we have language arts. We don't teach science in depth any more.

Do away with the department of education at the state and national levels. Make it easier to fire incompetent teachers.

Make physical education a requirement again. This is only required for a student that has chosen a 4 year 24 credit course of study, and then only 1 credit.

I could go on and on, but I believe we could trace our decline directly to the start of FCAT. (1998) This replaced the HSCP, (High School Competency Test) instituted in the early 1980's. The stated purpose was to make sure everyone that graduated had minimum skills in math and english. Note the use of the word minimum. As long as we only expect minimum that is all we get.

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@Bull Gator

By **Max42** | 11/28/10 - 09:33 am

It's not the FACT, per se, that started the decline, but rather the reason the FCAT was instituted. Because of the obsession with the so called "education gap" between white and black students, standards were simply tossed overboard during the 1980s and 1990s in futile attempts to "close the gap", or more to the point, cover it up. (This gap is the embarrassing result that proved busing was dismal failure.) The situation became so dire that community colleges (formerly junior colleges) went public in the late 1990s with complaints that 60% of their enrolling students needed remedial education in English and math, which clearly indicated the public high schools were failing to do their job, pushing the functionally illiterate "graduates" into the state university system to accomplish what the secondary schools had failed to accomplish. This is why the FCAT was established.

Of course the FCAT has failed to "close the gap", even as it is changed, altered and revamped every year so that there are no meaningful year to year results to compare for trending data.

Why the "gap" exists in the first place is an entirely different discussion.

One can not change the wind, but one can adjust the sails.

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Education compared to the rest of the world

By **aussiebat** | 11/29/10 - 08:53 am

The writer is not only talking about the black-white gap but also the gap between American students AS A WHOLE and the rest of the world. As a society we no longer value education and it shows. Take a look at most of the doctors at any hospital... they are generally foreign. American students of ALL races no longer want to put in the time and effort to learn when they can 1) hope to win the lottery, 2) become a reality star, 3) become good at some sport. You know you are in trouble when more people can name the judges on Dancing with the Stars than 3 Supreme Court Justices!

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